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ABSTRACT

Because of recent public demand that English teachers teach students basic writing skills to prepare them for employment, a study was conducted in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, to determine what kinds of writing skills employers require of their workers. One hundred and sixty-four employers of the Association of Manufacturers and Commerce were sent a listing of 27 writing skills and were asked to check whether "some," "much," or "little" competency was desired in each skill area. The skill areas fell into three categories: composition, punctuation, and word usage. The results indicated a great deal of demand for writing skills in the composition area, although footnoting, writing from an outline, outlining, and rewriting were not highly desired skills. Employers seemed to agree that punctuation skills were also desirable. The word usage category included spelling and vocabulary, and employers wanted "much" competency in this area as well. Overall the results indicated that writing skills are important for getting and keeping a job. (HTH)

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How Do Employers View Writing Skills?

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How Do Employers View Writing Skills?

Many expressions of concern have been voiced in recent days by critics of the schools. One very current complaint is that English teachers especially aren't doing the job and a big part of this complaint relates to writing. There is concern that the writing skills of students coming through our schools today are so inadequate that these students will be handicapped for life, especially in finding and holding jobs. While English teachers might protest that preparing students for employment is not the only, or even perhaps the major, responsibility they have, it does seem true that this concern is frequently uppermost in the public mind.

Just what is the exact nature of the complaint that students can't write well enough to get a job when they graduate? What kinds of writing skills are necessary for employment in today's society? How can English teachers prepare students with "employable" writing skills unless these skills are known and generally agreed upon?

Answering such questions about writing skills was central to this study. In addition, the writing skills, once identified, were presented to employers of high school graduates to determine what degree of agreement existed as to their importance or lack of importance.

Every employer listed in a directory published by the local area Association of Manufacturers and Commerce was sent a listing of 27 writing skills which had been taken from an examination of high school curriculum materials and texts, especially "business English" materials. Each employer was asked to check whether "some," "much," or "little" competency was desired in each writing skill on the part of employees or persons who would be hired.

A return envelope and cover letter explaining the purpose of the research accompanied the listing.[1]

Results proved to be interesting and did shed some light on the question of which writing skills employers seem to agree are important in getting and keeping a job.

The writing skills on the list presented to the 164 employers listed in the Area Guide, the directory of the area Association of Manufactuers and Commerce appeared to fall into three distinct categories or sub-sets of the general "writing problem" that has been so noted by critics of the schools. These groupings could be labeled composition, punctuation, and word usage and it does appear to be more useful and more precise to use these groupings than merely noting a writing problem. Most of the writing skills (15 of the 27) fell into the composition category since they had to do directly with writing. The punctuation and word usage categories contain skills which perhaps relate less directly to the act of writing.

When the replies came back from employers they were tabulated in each of the three categories of writing skills. Within each of the three categories employers made some distinctions which should prove interesting and helpful to English teachers. Table One shows the results of the 787 responses employers made indicating a desire for "some," "much," or "little" competency in the writing skills in the composition category.

It is interesting to note that only one response in seven is in the

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[1]This research was supported by the Robert C. Pooley Foundation of the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English. It was completed in May, 1978.

TABLE 1

FREQUENCY OF RESPONSES IN EACH CATEGORY

FOR COMPOSITION

	MUCH	SOME	LITTLE
Writes in complete sentences	51	8	0
Writes business letters	34	19	7
Writes friendly letters	15	29	9
Footnotes writing	1	18	30
Uses transitions between ideas	15	24	7
Writes directions	26	21	2
Uses expressive words	21	29	3
Writes from an outline	12	24	17
Writes in paragraphs	38	10	6
Writes summaries	21	25	4
Takes notes	27	20	6
Re-writes material	13	29	10
Outlines material	9	26	16
Edits writing	31	19	4
Writes descriptions	20	27	4
TOTALS	334	328	125

"little competency desired" column. This would appear to indicate a great deal of interest in writing skills on the part of the employers in this survey. Footnoting, writing from an outline, outlining, and re-writing are not favored however and this might put such a practice as writing a research paper in high school English classes in question, at least as far as developing "employable skills in writing" may be concerned. On the other hand, writing in complete sentences, skill in writing business letters, writing in paragraphs and skill in editing appear to be viewed with favor by the employers and as desired skills in persons they would employ or retain.

Table Two summarizes the results for the punctuation aspect of the writing problem.

TABLE 2

FREQUENCY OF RESPONSES IN EACH CATEGORY

FOR PUNCTUATION

	MUCH	SOME	LITTLE
Uses apostrophe	34	15	5
Uses end marks	40	12	2
Uses commas	45	12	2
Uses colons and semi-colons	35	15	6
Uses quotation marks	35	10	10
TOTALS	189	64	25

Employers responding to the questions raised in this study seemed to agree pretty well across the board that punctuation skill is something they greatly desire in a person they would hire. Skill in use of quotation marks drew least support, but in general all aspects of punctuation seem to be viewed by employers as important writing skills.

Table Three shows the results for writing skills grouped under the word usage category. Again the "much competency desired" column dominates with most attention by the employers. The proportion favoring "much" or "some" competency outweighs "little competency desired" by a little better than three to one.

TABLE 3

FREQUENCY OF RESPONSES IN EACH CATEGORY

FOR WORD USAGE

	MUCH	SOME	LITTLE
Spells words correctly	54	6	0
Uses dictionary	44	9	2
Syllabicates words	24	22	6
Abbreviates words	17	26	7
Uses a wide vocabulary	23	26	6
Capitalizes words	39	13	5
Alphabetizes words	22	18	10
TOTALS	223	120	36

How do employers view writing skills? The results gained in this study indicate that the answer to that question seems to be that in general writing skills <u>are</u> important in getting and keeping a job. It is revealing to note the decidedly lower frequencies of response in the column headed "little competency desired." It is possible that responders may have checked "some" rather than "little" on the assumption that some competency is always better than little but the results of this study do appear to be a strong endorsement of writing skills by the employers in this study.

The results of this study could serve as a kind of beginning agenda for action by English teachers. If we can assume that these members of the area Association of Manufacturers and Commerce are typical employers and their responses are typical of employers in general then we can begin working on some things that are a bit more specific and agreed upon than a general "writing problem." English teachers might plan, for instance, to spend more instructional time on some of the skills that drew more support from employers and less on skills that drew less endorsement in this study.

It could well be that there are other "publics" English teachers need to gather information from in addition to employers. Such further study would undoubtedly result in clearer delineation of the "writing problem." It probably is true that preparation for employment is not the only task of the English teacher or the English curriculum, but these results at least may give us one possible direction in grappling with the problem of writing skills.

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